

# The effect of precursor composition and sintering additives on the formation of $\beta$ -sialon from Al, Si and $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$ powders

H.C. Ewing<sup>\*</sup>, S. Yang

*Department of Mechanical Engineering, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow G1 1XJ, UK*

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## Abstract

A study was performed to investigate the effect of increasing the Al or  $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  precursor content, above the stoichiometric amount, on the formation of  $\beta$ -sialon by pressureless sintering of Al, Si and  $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  powders in flowing nitrogen gas. The effect of adding  $\text{Y}_2\text{O}_3$  or Fe to the precursor mixture, on the  $\beta$ -sialon formation, was also studied. The phase morphology and yield produced by the various compositions were examined using X-ray diffraction (XRD). Additional  $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  decreases the  $\beta$ -sialon phase yield and results in a greater amount of  $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  in the final sintered material. Additional Al improved the conversion to  $\beta$ -sialon up to a maximum of 4 wt% Al beyond which the  $\beta$ -sialon:15R sialon ratio in the sintered material decreases. 1 wt%  $\text{Y}_2\text{O}_3$  was determined to be the optimum sintering additive content, as yttrium aluminium garnet (YAG) was found to be present in materials formed from higher  $\text{Y}_2\text{O}_3$  containing precursors. The presence of Fe in the precursor powder retards the formation of  $\beta$ -sialon by preferentially forming Fe silicides at low temperatures, thus depleting the reaction system of elemental Si, favouring the formation of 15R sialon.

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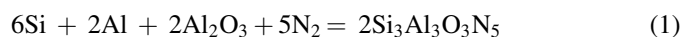
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## 1. Introduction

The effect of sintering parameters on the formation of  $\beta$ -sialon by pressureless sintering of Al, Si and  $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  powders in a nitriding atmosphere was previously examined by the present authors [1]. A combination of nitrided pressureless sintering and direct nitridation of metallic Si and Al was found to be capable of producing low-cost sialon products, benefiting from ease of forming and green machining due to the presence of Al and Si particles. However, the materials formed were found to exhibit low density  $\sim 70\%$  and full conversion to  $\beta$ -sialon was not achieved even after sintering at  $1600^\circ\text{C}$  [1]. The aim of the present work is to examine the effect, on  $\beta$ -sialon formation and density of the final materials, of increasing the amount of Al or  $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  reactants and including  $\text{Y}_2\text{O}_3$  or Fe sintering additives in the precursor powder.

An advantage of the reaction sintering process is that with the inclusion of additional reactants the reaction tends towards

the formation of  $\beta$ -sialon, as illustrated in Eq. (1).



Simultaneous reaction and sintering control is a key factor in the production of  $\beta$ -sialon and is sensitive to starting material composition, understanding the effects of additional reactants and additives will allow the microstructure and properties of the final  $\beta$ -sialon to be controlled.

It is well known that pressureless sintering of dense  $\text{Si}_3\text{N}_4$ -based ceramics requires the use of a sintering additive [2–12]. However, the introduction of such an additive gives rise to residual glassy and/or crystalline intergranular phases [2–4] as a result of the formation of a liquid phase during sintering. As a rule, the presence of such secondary phases has a detrimental effect on the high temperature properties of the ceramic [5]. The most frequently used sintering aids are MgO and  $\text{Y}_2\text{O}_3$  but other additives such as CaO,  $\text{Sc}_2\text{O}_3$ ,  $\text{CeO}_2$ , BeO and  $\text{Li}_2\text{O}$  have also been investigated [6–8]. Additives have been shown to influence nitridation by interacting with silicon particles and the surface silica layer. Specifically, iron has been shown to help initialise nitridation, either by reacting directly with the silicon to form iron silicides [9], by causing devitrification or

<sup>\*</sup> Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 141 548 2144; fax: +44 141 552 5105.

E-mail address: [hewing@mecheng.strath.ac.uk](mailto:hewing@mecheng.strath.ac.uk) (H.C. Ewing).

Table 1  
Precursor compositions examined.

Series		Composition (wt%)				
		Si	Al	Al <sub>2</sub> O <sub>3</sub>	Y <sub>2</sub> O <sub>3</sub>	Fe
Basic composition		39.52	12.66	47.82		
Additional Al <sub>2</sub> O <sub>3</sub>	10	37.72	12.08	50.20		
	25	35.30	11.31	53.39		
	50	31.89	10.22	57.89		
Additional Al	2	39.42	12.88	47.70		
	3	39.37	12.99	47.64		
	4	39.32	13.10	47.58		
	5	39.27	13.21	47.52		
	10	39.03	13.75	47.22		
	15	38.78	14.29	46.93		
Y <sub>2</sub> O <sub>3</sub> additive (4 wt% Al additional)	0.25	39.22	13.07	47.46	0.25	
	0.50	39.12	13.03	47.34	0.50	
	0.75	39.03	13.00	47.22	0.75	
	1	38.93	12.97	47.10	1.00	
	2	38.53	12.84	46.63	2.00	
	3	38.14	12.71	46.15	3.00	
	4	37.75	12.58	45.68	4.00	
Fe additive (4 wt% Al)	0.2	39.24	13.07	47.48		0.2
	0.4	39.16	13.05	47.39		0.4
	0.6	39.08	13.02	47.29		0.6
	0.8	39.01	13.00	47.20		0.8
	1.0	38.93	12.97	47.10		1.0

the removal of the silicon's silica surface layer [10]. The addition of sintering aids such as yttria has been shown by transmission electron microscopy (TEM) analysis to aid the early stages of nitridation by reacting with the silica surface layer and promoting its removal [11]. The inclusion of these additives generally results in increased rates of nitridation when compared to that of pure silicon, which requires a long sintering time (e.g.  $\geq 72$  h at 1400 °C) for successful nitridation due to the highly exothermic nature of the reactions between silicon and nitrogen [12].

In the present work, the effect of yttria and iron sintering additives on  $\beta$ -sialon formation from Al, Si and Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> powders is examined. The effect of increasing the amount of alumina and aluminium beyond the stoichiometric amount, obtained from Eq. (1) and given in Table 1, is also investigated.

## 2. Experimental

### 2.1. Powder processing and compact nitriding

$\beta$ -Sialon (Si<sub>6-z</sub>Al<sub>z</sub>O<sub>z</sub>N<sub>8-z</sub>,  $z = 3$ ) was selected as the target material in the present investigations. The precursor compositions investigated are detailed in Table 1. Each series is based on previous experiments with the inclusion of subsequent compositional variations. The basic composition of the samples, i.e., stoichiometric amount obtained from Eq. (1), is also detailed in Table 1. The following starting powders were used: Si (98.17%,  $d_{50} = 15.83$   $\mu$ m, Aldrich Chemicals Ltd.), Al (99%,  $d_{50} = 36.35$   $\mu$ m, Aldrich Chemicals Ltd.), Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>

(99.87%,  $d_{50} = 4.65$   $\mu$ m, Alfa Aesar, UK), Y<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> (99.99%,  $d_{50} = 74$   $\mu$ m, PI-KEM, UK) and N<sub>2</sub> gas (99.998%, white spot grade, BOC, UK).

The starting material mixtures were dry milled for 1 h using zirconia milling media, to produce homogeneous batches. The powder mixtures were weighed then mixed in an alumina mortar, using a few drops of a 5 wt% aqueous solution of polyvinyl alcohol (PVA) as a temporary binder. The powders were then pressed in a cylindrical steel die with an inner diameter of 14 mm using a pressure of 100 MPa. After pressing, green compacts were dried at 150 °C overnight and then held at 500 °C for 3 h to remove the binders. The dried specimens were then weighed and sintered in a horizontal tube furnace under flowing N<sub>2</sub> introduced at a rate of 6 l/min under 10<sup>5</sup> N/m<sup>2</sup> pressure at 1500 °C.

The sintering schedule was kept constant and all sialon precursor mixtures were heated to 1350 °C at 5 °C min<sup>-1</sup>, held for 120 min, heated to 1500 °C at 2 °C min<sup>-1</sup> then held at this temperature for 180 min.

### 2.2. Characterisation

The crystal lattice parameters of  $\beta$ -sialon and the phase composition of the final reaction products were analysed by X-ray diffraction using a Philips PW1120 X-ray diffractometer (CuK $\alpha$ , 40 kV, 20 mA). Peak areas were used to estimate semi-quantitatively the evolution of the reaction products.

The bulk density and apparent porosity of each specimen was measured by the Archimedes method. The samples were weighed before and after sintering.

### 3. Results and discussion

#### 3.1. Effect of additional $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$

The inclusion of additional  $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  powder, above the stoichiometric ratio, to the precursor mixture was not found to benefit the nitridation reaction, as the percentage weight gained by the materials during sintering decreased as the  $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  content in the precursor increased, Fig. 1(a).

This observation was also supported by the XRD results, Fig. 2(a), which shows that increasing amounts of  $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  in the precursor powder caused the relative amount of  $\beta$ -sialon formed to decrease as the amount of  $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  in the product material rose.

The bulk density of the product material increased linearly with increasing additional  $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  included in the precursor, Fig. 3(a). This again is consistent with the above observations that more  $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  in the precursor results in more  $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  in the product.  $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  is denser than sialon ( $3.987 \text{ g/cm}^3$  for  $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  cc  $3.077 \text{ g/cm}^3$  for  $\beta$ -sialon [13]) and therefore an increase in the  $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$ : $\beta$ -sialon ratio in the product material would be expected to result in a material with higher bulk density.

The apparent porosity of the sintered materials, also shown in Fig. 3(a), shows the reverse behaviour to that of the bulk density, i.e., a linear decrease with increasing  $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  precursor content.

This further supports the observation that more  $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  in the precursor results in more  $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  and less sialon in the product material as  $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  materials densify more easily than sialons. Therefore, a material with more  $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  present in the starting mixture would be expected to experience greater densification during sintering at  $1500^\circ\text{C}$ , resulting in lower porosity.

The nitridation reaction in the present system ( $\text{Si-Al-Al}_2\text{O}_3\text{-N}_2$ ) depends on species which are able to introduce nitrogen into the structure of the reaction product, such as  $[\text{SiN}_4]$  or  $[\text{AlN}_4]$  allowing sialon materials to form. Silicon and aluminium metal are able to react with nitrogen gas to form  $[\text{SiN}_4]$  or  $[\text{AlN}_4]$ , however the role of  $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  in the reaction sequence is to provide Al–O units [1] and additional  $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  does not result in an increase in the sialon formation.

Therefore, the results clearly indicate that the addition of  $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$ , beyond the stoichiometric amount, to the precursor powder mixture, does not improve the nitriding reaction to form sialon and results in an increase in the residual  $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  phase within the final material.

#### 3.2. Effect of additional Al

Increasing the amount of aluminium metal within the precursor powder in excess of the stoichiometric amount

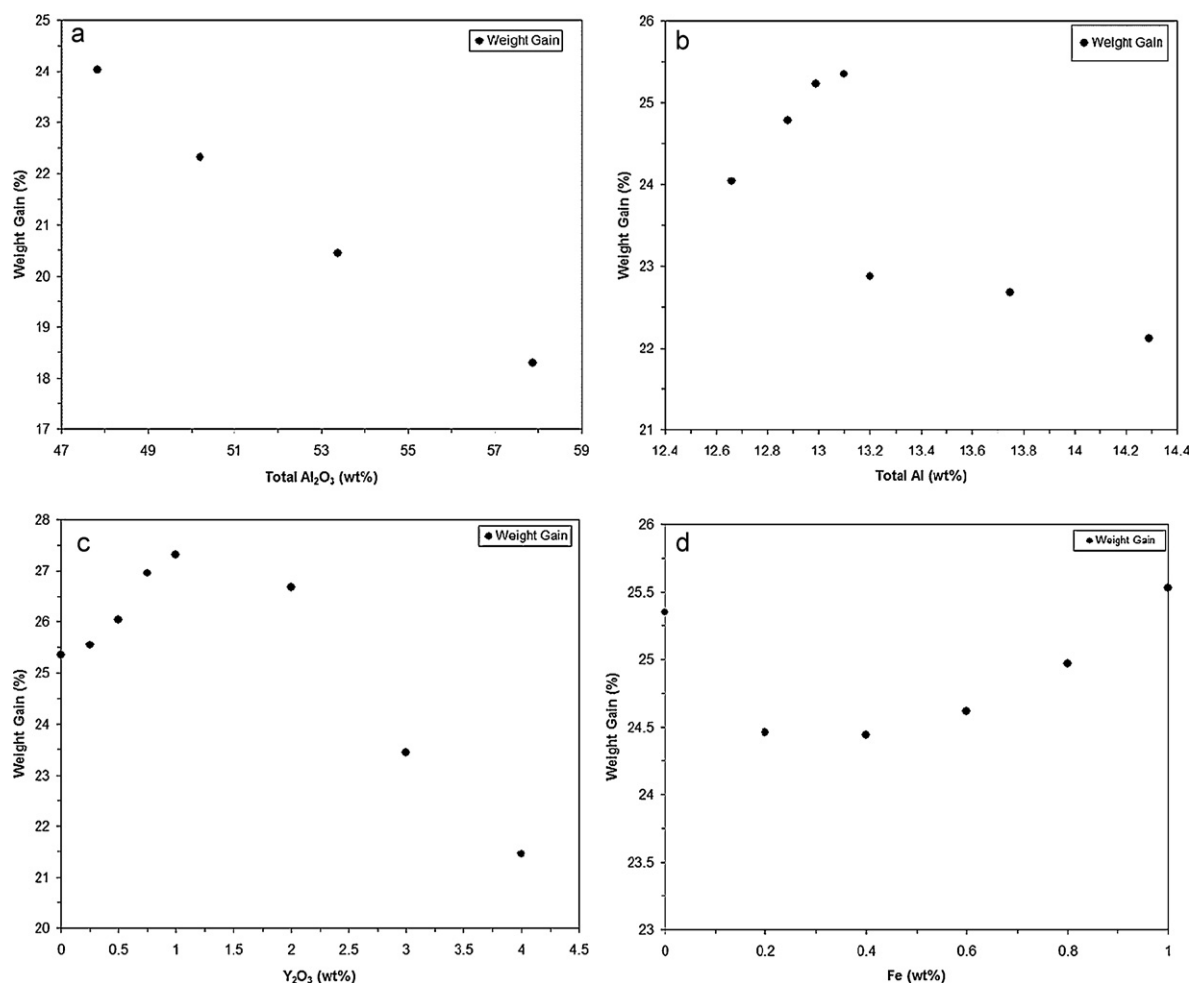


Fig. 1. Weight gain during sintering vs. (a)  $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$ , (b) Al, (c)  $\text{Y}_2\text{O}_3$  and (d) Fe content.

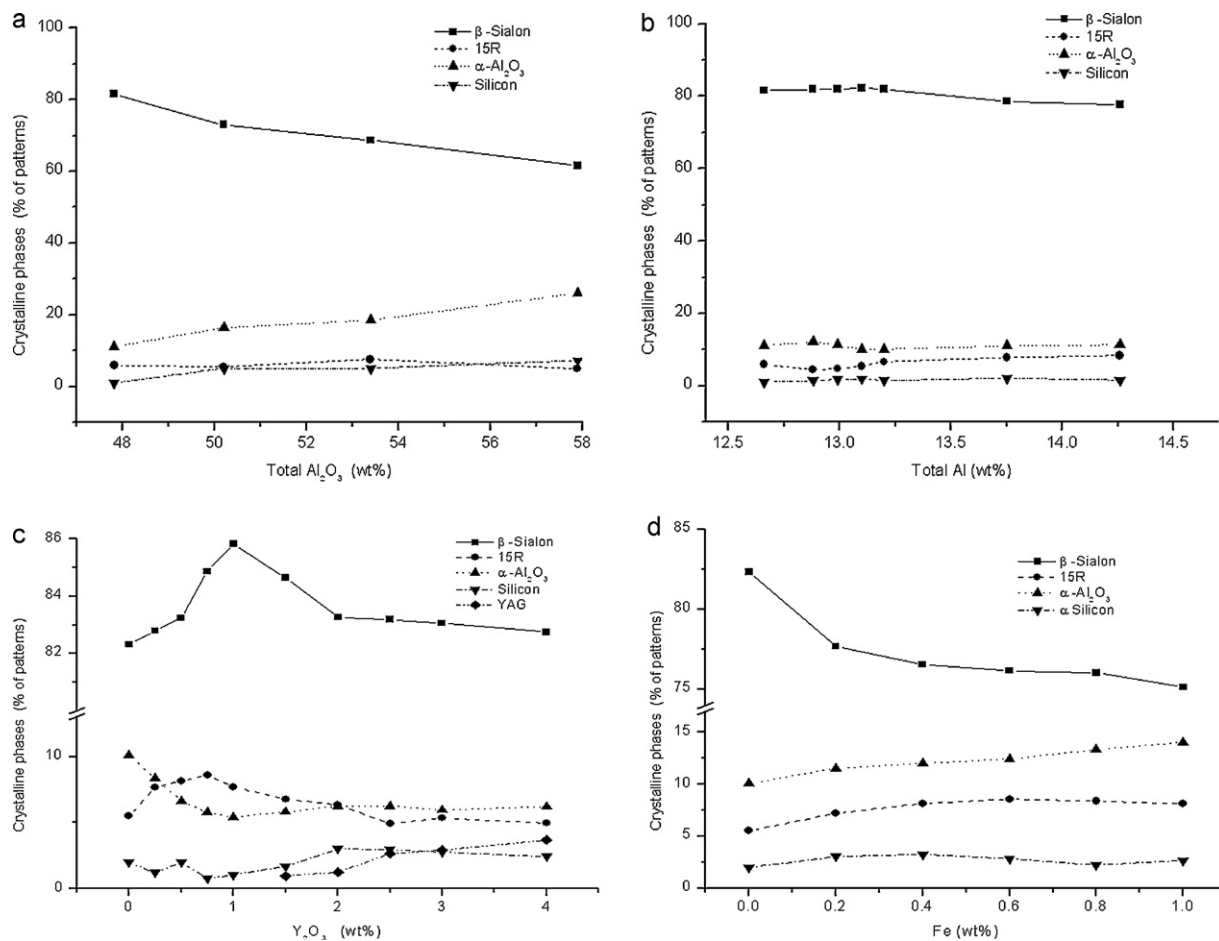


Fig. 2. Phase evolution of sintered samples vs. (a)  $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$ , (b) Al, (c)  $\text{Y}_2\text{O}_3$  and (d) Fe content.

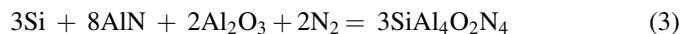
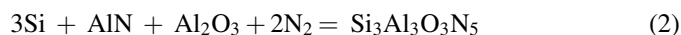
appeared to benefit the nitridation reaction, as the percentage of weight gained by the materials during sintering increased with increasing aluminium in the precursor powder, up to a maximum of 13.1 wt% total Al (4 wt% above the stoichiometric amount), Fig. 1(b). Above this composition, however, the continued increase in precursor Al content, resulted in a drop in weight gain (approximately 3%) which continued to decrease as the Al precursor content was increased further, suggesting that the nitridation reaction is being retarded by the excess Al.

This change in observed behaviour, when the total Al content exceeds 13.1 wt%, appears to be due to the formation of increasing amounts of 15R polytype sialon at the expense of  $\beta$ -sialon formation, in the product material. The evolution of the crystalline phases detected by XRD plotted in Fig. 2(b), shows that the occurrence of 15R polytype sialon increases with increasing Al precursor content as the amount of  $\beta$ -sialon decreases, when the total Al content exceeds 13.1 wt% (4 wt% above the stoichiometric amount). The amount of  $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  in the product material is also observed to increase when the total Al content of the precursor exceeds 13.1 wt%, suggesting that the consumption of  $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  to form  $\beta$ -sialon, by the reactions shown in Eq. (1), is inhibited by Al concentrations greater than 4 wt% over the stoichiometric amount.

The Al content is higher in 15R polytype sialon ( $\text{SiAl}_4\text{O}_2\text{N}_4$ ), i.e., Al:Si = 4:1, than in  $\beta$ -sialon ( $\text{Si}_3\text{Al}_3\text{O}_3\text{N}_5$ ),

Al:Si = 1:1. Therefore, the increased aluminium content of the starting materials would be expected to favour the formation of 15R sialon. It is known from previous study, that Al nitrides to form AlN during the heating stage below 1000 °C, under the current experimental conditions [1]. Therefore, raising the aluminium content in the precursor material will result in an increase in AlN at the reaction temperature, causing the reactant composition to shift towards the AlN edge of the phase diagram promoting the formation of 15R sialon, Fig. 4 [14].

Increasing the AlN:Si ratio will favour the formation of 15R sialon with respect to  $\beta$ -sialon as shown in Eqs. (2) and (3). The stoichiometric ratio of AlN:Si to form 1 mole of  $\beta$ -sialon is 1:3 from Eq. (2), however, the ratio to form 1 mole of 15R sialon from Eq. (3) is AlN:Si = 1:0.38.



The bulk density of the product materials was found to increase linearly with increasing precursor Al content, with a clear shift in behaviour at 13.1 wt% beyond which the bulk density was observed to decrease which is consistent with the previous observations of weight gain behaviour, Fig. 3(b). At compositions of 13.1 wt% and below the nitrogen increases with precursor Al content as more AlN is present and able to be

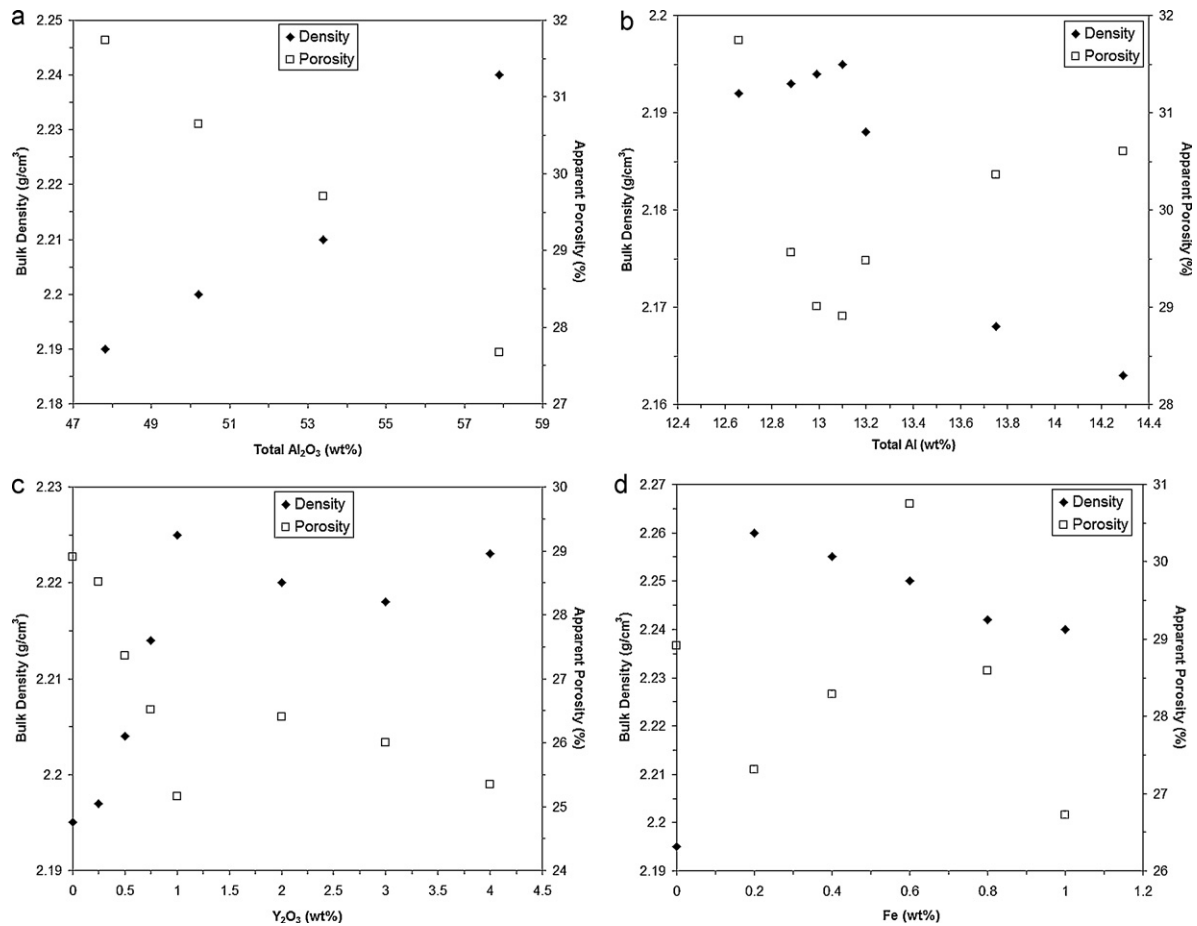


Fig. 3. Density & porosity vs. (a) Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>, (b) Al, (c) Y<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> and (d) Fe content.

nitrided further, according to the reactions in Eqs. (2) and (3) to form  $\beta$ -sialon, therefore the bulk density of the product material also increases as more nitrogen is incorporated into the material. At total Al compositions above 13.1 wt% less nitrogen is being incorporated into the material due to the increase in 15R sialon formation and decrease in  $\beta$ -sialon.

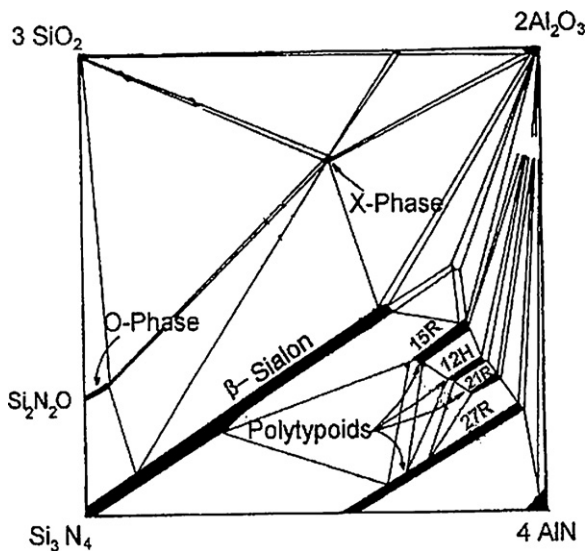


Fig. 4. Si–Al–O–N system phase diagram at 1400 °C [14].

The apparent porosity, Fig. 3(b), exhibits the inverse behaviour to the bulk density; initially with increasing precursor Al content, there is an increase in matrix phase formation, i.e.  $\beta$ -sialon, as shown in Fig. 2(b), which reduces the apparent porosity. However, at Al levels beyond 13.1 wt% there is a decrease in the amount of  $\beta$ -sialon matrix phase formed as 15R sialon becomes increasingly evident in the reaction product.

The results would suggest that 13.1 wt% total Al is the maximum limit to the balanced composition of the sialon precursor as the XRD results, Fig. 2(b), revealed the maximum percentage of  $\beta$ -sialon (83%) in the product material. The reaction product formed from the precursor material with additional 4 wt% Al (13.10 wt% in total) exhibited the highest bulk density (2.195 g/cm<sup>3</sup>), lowest porosity (28.91%) and highest weight gain (25.35%) over the range of Al compositions examined (additional 2–15 wt% Al) suggesting that the inclusion of 4 wt% Al in excess of the stoichiometric amount is beneficial to  $\beta$ -sialon formation as well as improving the bulk density and decreasing the apparent porosity.

### 3.3. Effect of additional yttria

The effect of the addition of Y<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> to the precursor material, on  $\beta$ -sialon formation, varied depending on the Y<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> content. Concentrations of 1 wt% Y<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> and below increased the weight



gained by the material during sintering, Fig. 1(c), suggesting that the presence of  $Y_2O_3$  promoted the nitridation reaction. This observation was supported by the XRD results, Fig. 2(c), which indicate that the percentage of  $\beta$ -sialon present within the final material increased with increasing  $Y_2O_3$  content in the precursor up to 1 wt%. An increase in  $\beta$ -sialon in the product material of approximately 4 wt% was observed when comparing the material formed from 1 wt%  $Y_2O_3$  to non  $Y_2O_3$  containing precursors.

As the  $Y_2O_3$  content is increased further however, i.e.,  $Y_2O_3$  wt%  $\geq 1.5$ , the percentage of  $\beta$ -sialon in the sintered material was observed to fall as an additional phase, yttrium aluminium garnet (YAG) ( $Y_3Al_5O_{12}$ ), is found to be present in the material, which increases with increasing  $Y_2O_3$  content.

The most promising results regarding the sialon development with respect to phase evolution (Fig. 2) are the curves obtained when  $Y_2O_3$  is used as a sintering additive. In the presence of  $Y_2O_3$  (Fig. 2(c)), the  $\beta$ -sialon content is clearly higher after sintering than in the case of the other precursors. The  $\beta$ -sialon content has a maximum value (86% in Fig. 2(c)) and the density achieved a maximum of  $2.225 \text{ g/cm}^3$  simultaneously at 1 wt%  $Y_2O_3$  content (Fig. 3(c)), suggesting that the addition of 1 wt%  $Y_2O_3$  to the precursor composition is beneficial to promote sintering.

The effectiveness of  $Y_2O_3$  on the sintering behaviour of sialons agrees with the known role of  $Y_2O_3$  as a sintering aid, i.e., active in removing the silica layer from the silicon powder particles to form a secondary crystalline phase, which participates in the early formation of a liquid phase. The pre-nitridation step ( $1300^\circ\text{C}$  for 120 min) is reported to be accompanied by early reaction of all  $Y_2O_3$  to form yttrium silicate phases [15]. O'Meara et al. [16] reported that the yttrium silicate phases present after the pre-nitridation step are totally consumed upon full nitridation in favour of a partial  $Si_3N_4$ - $SiO_2$ - $Y_2O_3$ - $Al_2O_3$  liquid phase and YAG formation. Formation of  $\beta$ -sialon in compositions with lower  $Y_2O_3$ : $Al_2O_3$  ratios is in agreement with known phase relationships in this system since such compositions are closer to the base of the Jänecke prism and, therefore, to  $\beta$ -sialon [17].

The yttria content, must be balanced to allow maximum nitridation at the lowest temperature to occur but not the formation of too much early liquid, which may tend to close down the pore structure and inhibit nitridation. This is most likely the cause of the decrease in the weight gain (Fig. 1(c)) and the  $\beta$ -sialon content (Fig. 2(c)) with increasing  $Y_2O_3$  content beyond 1 wt% in the precursor powder.

Increasing the  $Y_2O_3$  additive from 0.25 to 1.0 wt% caused the bulk density of the materials to increase, while the apparent porosity decreased, Fig. 3(c). 1.0 wt% of  $Y_2O_3$  included in the starting powders produced the highest density ( $2.225 \text{ g/cm}^3$ ) and the lowest porosity (25%) of all the  $Y_2O_3$  contents examined (0–4 wt%), see Fig. 3(c).

The yttrium containing materials possess higher densities (Fig. 3) than all other compositions examined, probably owing to yttrium's role in the formation of a liquid phase at lower temperature as previously discussed.

### 3.4. Effect of Fe additions

Adding Fe to the precursor powder reduced the amount of  $\beta$ -sialon and raised the percentage of 15R sialon and residual  $Al_2O_3$  in the product material, Fig. 2(d). Increasing amounts of Fe exacerbated this effect.

Fig. 3(d) shows that the bulk density passed through a maximum ( $2.26 \text{ g/cm}^3$ ) at 0.2 wt% Fe and then decreased, with further increasing Fe content. The apparent porosity increases from 0.2 to 0.6 wt% Fe and then decreases as greater amounts of Fe are included.

Weight gain during sintering was observed to be less when 0.2 wt% Fe was included in the precursor powder compared with 0 wt% Fe precursors, Fig. 1(d). However, increasing the Fe content further caused the weight gain during nitriding to increase.

Fe is known to facilitate nitridation either by reacting directly with silicon to form iron silicides [15,16] or by causing devitrification and removal of the silica surface layer on silicon particles [18]. The susceptibility of the silica layer to the effects of iron impurities in the early stages of nitridation have been related to the thickness of the silica layer and iron impurities have been shown to lower the temperature of nitridation [19].

According to the Fe–Si phase diagram [20], a eutectic is formed at  $1207^\circ\text{C}$  suggesting that the formation of a liquid phase will occur before the onset of nitriding in the present system, which was found to occur above  $1400^\circ\text{C}$  [1].  $FeSi_2$  is the lowest-melting of the iron silicides and is most likely to form during the reaction-sintering process. This is verified by XRD analyses of samples with  $\geq 0.6$  wt% Fe, which indicate the presence of trace amounts of silicides (Fig. 5). The small peaks at approximately  $17^\circ 2\theta$  and  $45^\circ 2\theta$  in Fig. 5 correspond to  $FeSi_2$ .

The formation of iron silicides, at temperatures ( $1207^\circ\text{C}$ ) well below the onset of sialon formation reactions at  $1400^\circ\text{C}$ , depletes the system of silicon metal which could otherwise be available to participate in sialon formation. This has the effect of altering the chemistry of the system such that the ratio of  $AlN$ : $Si$  is increased. Increasing the  $AlN$ : $Si$  ratio will favour the formation of 15R sialon with respect to  $\beta$ -sialon as discussed previously. Therefore, the addition of Fe to the stoichiometric precursor ratio was found to be detrimental to the formation of  $\beta$ -sialon.

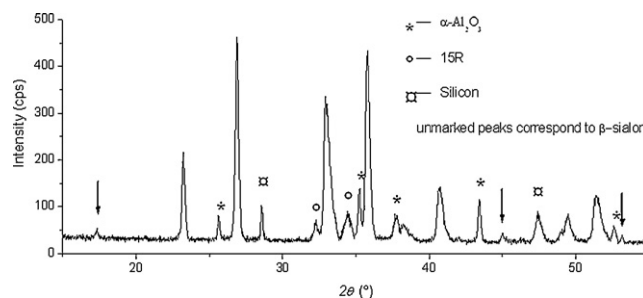


Fig. 5. XRD pattern of 1.0 wt% Fe additive sample (arrows at approx.  $17^\circ$  and  $45^\circ 2\theta$  correspond to  $FeSi_2$ , arrow at approx.  $53^\circ 2\theta$  corresponds to  $Fe_3Si$ ).

#### 4. Conclusion

The present work, to examine the effects of precursor composition and sintering additives on the formation of  $\beta$ -sialon by the pressureless sintering of Al, Si and  $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  powder in a flowing nitrogen atmosphere at 1500 °C, determined that increasing the amount of  $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  powder in the precursor beyond the stoichiometric amount, did not benefit the formation of  $\beta$ -sialon and resulted in an increase in residual  $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  in the product material suggesting that additional  $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  does not participate in the nitridation reaction.

Increasing the amount of Al in the precursor powder beyond the stoichiometric amount promoted the formation of  $\beta$ -sialon in the product material with a maximum occurring when the total Al content was 13.1 wt% (4 wt% above the stoichiometric amount). Beyond this Al concentration the formation of 15R polytype sialon became more pronounced at the expense of  $\beta$ -sialon. This is proposed to be due to the increase in AlN:Si ratio with increasing Al content in the starting material.

The addition of  $\text{Y}_2\text{O}_3$  to the precursor powder mixture (which included the stoichiometric amounts + 4 wt% additional Al) promotes the formation of  $\beta$ -sialon and improves the density of the product material, by forming liquid phases which promote diffusion, with a maximum occurring with an  $\text{Y}_2\text{O}_3$  concentration of 1 wt%. Further increases in the  $\text{Y}_2\text{O}_3$  content resulted in the formation of yttrium aluminium garnet (YAG) within the product material.

The addition of Fe to the precursor mixture (which included the stoichiometric amounts + 4 wt% additional Al) was found to be detrimental to the formation of  $\beta$ -sialon and promoted the formation of 15R polytype sialon, resulting in a reduction of the  $\beta$ -sialon:15R sialon ratio in the final material. This effect is proposed to be due to the formation of iron silicides at temperatures (1207 °C) well below the onset of nitridation (1400 °C), which depletes the system of silicon and raises the AlN:Si ratio which favours the formation of 15R sialon.

The reaction to form  $\beta$ -sialon did not reach completion with any of the compositions studied and residual  $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  and silicon were present in all materials produced. 15R sialon was always found to be present when  $\beta$ -sialon formed.

The lowest apparent porosity (25%) and the highest bulk density (2.225 g/cm<sup>3</sup>) were achieved when 1 wt%  $\text{Y}_2\text{O}_3$  and an additional 4 wt% Al were included in the precursor powder.

The optimal precursor composition, from the present work, for forming  $\beta$ -sialon by pressurelessly sintering Al, Si and  $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  powders in a flowing nitrogen atmosphere at 1500 °C, based on the  $\beta$ -sialon:15R sialon ratio in the product material, bulk density and apparent porosity was found to be; the stoichiometric composition (12.66 wt% Al, 39.52 wt% Si, 47.82 wt%  $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$ ) plus the addition of 1 wt%  $\text{Y}_2\text{O}_3$  and an additional 4 wt% Al.

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